

Above and below right
Room, 2007-2008
(interior and exterior views)
Wood veneer, pyrography, shellac
96 x 120 x 96 inches
Collection of Peter Dinklage

Cover of *Study for Folie à Deux*, 2008 (detail)
Wood veneer, shellac
25 x 22 inches
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery,
New York, NY

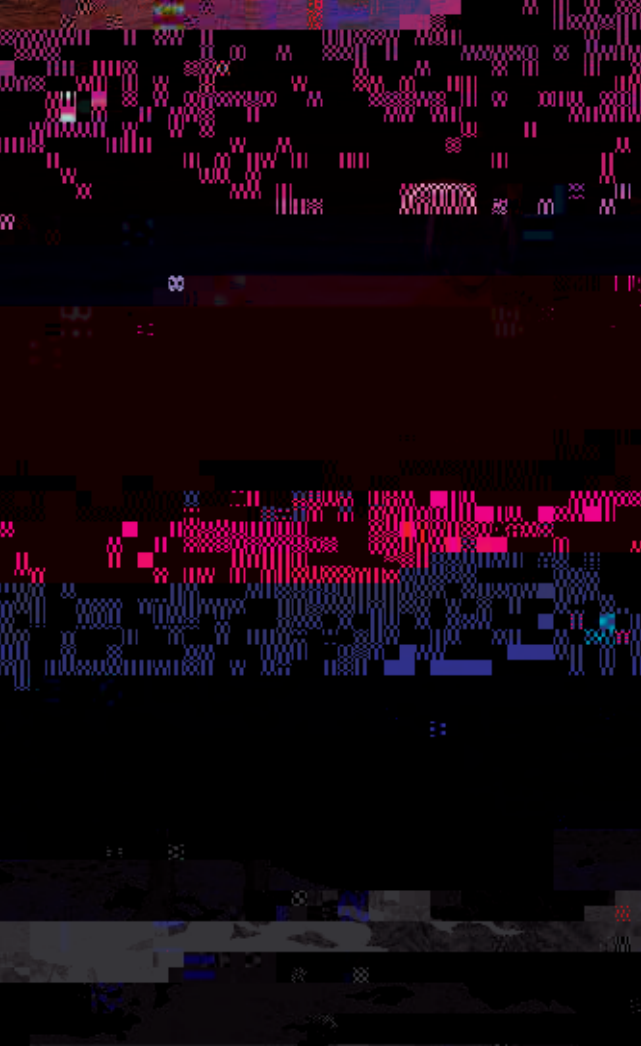
Life in the "On-de-binge" era of the late 1990s and early 2000s has been a wild ride with the explosion of decadence as norm and the stunning recession of 2008 brought on, in part, by the collapse of trusted financial institutions. Mirroring the larger culture, artists during this period responded to the often confusing, rapidly evolving socio-cultural and economic landscape by creating new paradigms for their art practices—some were profound, some not, many were culled from the detritus of lived lives; and others, like Alison Elizabeth Taylor, imbued their art with a disquieting exactitude of intent.

As an artist coming of age in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Taylor's marquetry-cum-paintings are a synthesis of tour de force technique and narratives bound together by themes of escape, isolation, and passion. Taylor is deeply concerned with creating highly legible images that deal with concepts of territory, development, and progress

and the psychological states they inspire and provoke. In her view of the American Southwest where she grew up, tract homes and big box chain stores anchor "insta-communities" altering rural areas by gentrifying vestigial "frontiers" where off-the-gridders seek refuge from societal norms and expectations. Although Taylor's narratives mine the physical ramifications of the transformation of desert and remote rural areas into suburbia, it is the individuals who do not fit into the homogenous structures of comfort and consistency that populate the artist's imagination and art.

Born in Selma, Alabama, in 1974, Taylor grew up in Las Vegas, Nevada, one of the most explosive markets for new housing in recent years and a steroidal example of the historical boom and bust cycle of western towns. She received a BFA in painting at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA, in 2001, before completing her graduate work at Columbia University, New York, in 2005.

In the 1990s Taylor explored the narrative potential of integrating vinyl, wood-grain patterned contact paper into her drawings for its associations with the cheap, the faux, and the transient. However, it was the decorative program of the intarsia lined, humanist studio, or study, from the ducal palace



Bombay Beach 2008
Wood veneer, shellac
96 x 58 inches
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery,
New York, NY

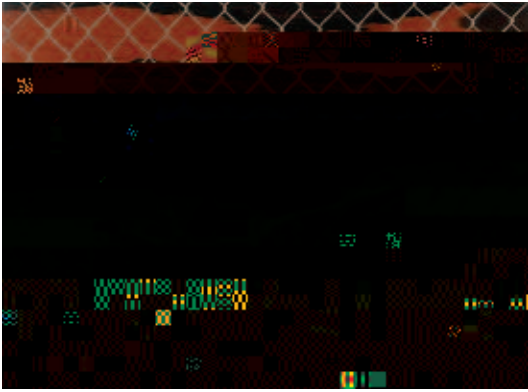
of Federico da Montefeltro (1422-1482) in Gubbio, Italy—now conserved and reconstructed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York—that inspired her to learn wood inlay techniques during her graduate work. Intarsia, or marquetry, is made by piecing together small bits of wood and affixing them to a substrate to form a flat, pictorial surface.³ In addition to displaying virtuoso inlay technique, such studios were also grand works intended to reinforce the position of the patron by demonstrating both intellectual prowess and the ability to afford such a highly labor intensive medium to decorate what was a secular, private space.

While Taylor also uses pyrography as a drawing medium (burning images into wood with a heated point) to convey further detail about her subjects, it is her use of the high-end medium of wood inlay in the same “painterly” manner of fifteenth-century Italian artisans that ultimately sets up an exquisite tension in these works. Describing her choice of medium, the artist states that:

Part of the appeal of wood inlay is its erratic flights to the high- and low-ends of the spectrum. This hierarchical schizophrenia of artistic value makes one consider how such distinctions are determined.

Before turning to a discussion of Taylor’s magnificent Room Na Figureless trompe l’œil (French for “fool the eye”) architectural portrait of an unknown inhabitant based on the Gubbio Studio Na discussion of the eight other works in the exhibition provide an illuminating look into her recurring themes. The first group of works, *Bombay Beach*, 2008, *Slab City*, 2007, and *Chainlink*, 2008, are set in the stark desert of southern California’s Salton Sea; and each describes a ramification of a very specific boom/bust scenario. The second group—*Study for Folie à Deux*, 2008 (cover), *Era of Argus*, 2007, *Wonder Valley*, 2008, *Study for Hank*, 2007, and *Paradise Gates*, 2009—inhabit a kind of nowhere land whose disparate narratives are linked by mutual passions, issues of survival, and a desire to live outside of the mainstream.

Slab City 2007
Marquetry, shellac
47 x 77 inches
Collection of Howard Simon



Chainlink 2008

Wood veneer, shellac

34 x 46 inches

Courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery,
New York, NY

Initially hailed as the "New Los Angeles" and the "Riviera of California," the Salton Sea, like Death Valley, is located below sea level. Known geologically as the Salton Sink, this inland area near Niland, California, alternated as a fresh water lake and dry desert basin for over three million years. The most recent replenishment of the Sea in 1905 was the result of rainfall, snowmelt, and an accidental flooding of the Colorado River into the Salton Sink. The area became a tourist attraction in the 1920s; and given the Sea's lack of outflow and the high salinity of its inflow, algae and bacterial blooms

caused by agricultural runoff increased exponentially as the twentieth century progressed. Although birds still use the Sea on migratory routes, and *Tilapia* is the only fish that can survive there, the toxic brew took a toll on residents and the tourism industry; by the 1970s many homes and businesses were abandoned.

Taylor Schreiber's *Bombay Beach*, 2008, refers to a community located on the east shore of the Salton Sea. The latest census figures report that there are approximately 366 people, mostly retirees, living in what remains of Bombay Beach. In the eight-foot tall, wood inlay, *Bombay Beach*, a deserted motel is visible to the left of the central, apostle-like figure, and an upended chair can be seen on the right. Naked and wrapped in a blanket, the figure's face is somewhat impassive although there is a hint of aggression in the man's furrowed eyebrows. According to the artist, squatters have been drawn to Bombay Beach to reclaim abandoned properties; and they tend to meet trespassers with hostility in this semi-abandoned public space, which, in a sense, has become private again.

Slab City refers to a community near Bombay Beach that exists on the decommissioned WWII base, Marine Barracks Camp Dunbar. During the winter months, campers and mobile homes line

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Selma, Alabama, Alison Elizabeth Taylor grew up in Las Vegas, NV, and currently lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. She received a BFA from the Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, CA, in 2001, and an MFA from Columbia University, New York, NY. In addition to her solo exhibition at The College of Wooster Art Museum, she had two solo exhibitions, in 2006 and 2008, respectively, at the James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at James Cohan

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is a moment in viewing Alison Elizabeth Taylor's work when, after marveling over the beautiful materials and the wood inlay details, the narrative starts to sink in and you find that you don't look away even though the story portrayed is less than comfortable. Artists play an important role in society, and it is their creation of moments like these that remind us just how crucial they are to a healthy society.

In addition to thanking Ali Taylor for her passion and vision as an artist, I would like to thank the James Cohan Gallery for their support of this exhibition. Elyse Goldberg, Director, James Cohan Gallery, New York, NY, was instrumental in producing this project, as were the James Cohan Gallery staff: Laurie Harrison, Alisa Ochoa, Michael Goodson, and Christopher Rawson. We also thank the lenders to the exhibition for generously sharing their works with the public: Jeff and Leslie Fischer, Tom and Charlotte Newby, Howard Simon, and Peter Tillou.

At Wooster, Doug McGlumphy, museum preparator, conceived the exhibition design and executed the beautiful installation; Joyce Fuell, museum administrative coordinator, handled the many exhibition details, from budgets to proofreading; and in the Publications Department, Roger Collier and Robin Welty once again produced a beautiful exhibition brochure on an unusually tight schedule.

Support for this exhibition was provided by The Burton D. Morgan Foundation, Hudson, OH, and a generous bequest from Muriel Mulac Kozlowski, member of the Class of 1948.

To all of the above I extend my warmest appreciation and gratitude.

Kitty McManus Zurko
Director and Curator

Alison Elizabeth Taylor

August 25 - October 11, 2009

Sussel Gallery and the Burton D. Morgan Gallery

The College of Wooster Art Museum

Ebert Art Center

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